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ARMY HEADQUARTERS

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Operations of Canadian
Railway Troops, 1943-1945

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R E P O R T NO. 46
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Operations of Canadian Railway Troops, 1943-1945

1. The purpose of this report is to relate briefly the activities of No. 1 Railway Operating Group R.C.E. during the Second World War. The chief sources used are the War Diaries of the Group's major component units: Nos. 1 and 2 Railway Operating Companies and No. 1 Railway Workshop Company.

EARLY HISTORY

2. During the First World War Canada provided a number of railway operating, maintenance and construction units. These, organized as a corps under the command of Brig-Gen J.W. Stewart, were employed in France, Belgium and the Near East. (W.D., No. 2 Rly Constr Coy R.C.E., beginning 2 Sep 39: Appx 1, "The Work of Railway Troops", lecture by Maj J.L. Charles)

3. When Canada began calling out troops on the eve of the Second World War, railway units were among the first to be placed on active service. Two Railway Operating Companies, two Construction Companies and one Workshop Company were named as L. of C. troops with the 2nd Division C.A.S.F. (G.O. 135/39). But almost immediately recruiting for these units was ordered deferred; and finally, late in 1943, they were either deleted from the mobilization order, or disbanded (W.Ds., No. 1 Rly Op Coy and No. 2 Rly Constr Coy, beginning September 1939. G.Os. 372 and 438 of 1943).

PRELIMINARY NEGOTIATIONS, 1939-1943

4. For over three years, commencing as early as 6 Sep 39 when - except on paper - Canada had no railway units, the United Kingdom repeatedly requested that the Dominion provide such troops. One proposal was that certain types of railway unit be included among the Canadian non-divisional troops to be sent overseas, another that the desired units be allocated to the Royal Engineers. ((C.M.H.Q.) 1/Non-Div/1, "Provision by Canada of Non-Divisional Troops and Technical Troops": Correspondence, 24 Sep - 2 Oct 39) Contrary factors, from Canada's point of view, included additional commitments arising out of the Air Training Scheme, a reorganization of the 1st Division and plans for the dispatch overseas of a second Canadian division. In June 1940, with the fall of France, the immediate need for railway troops disappeared; and negotiations were suspended for a year's time. Then, in view of the shortage of trained railwaymen in Britain, the U.K. Government again raised the question. No reply could be given, however, until the Canadian authorities had surveyed the Dominion's manpower situation in relation to military commitments abroad and to home industry. During the winter of 1942/43, while this project was being completed, Canadian Military Headquarters in England made a survey of former railwaymen already serving in the Canadian Army Overseas. ((C.M.H.Q.) 1/Railway/1, "Provision of Railway Units": Correspondence, October 1939 - February 1943)

5. On completion of these surveys the Canadian authorities saw fit to raise, effective 19 Mar 43, the following railway troops:

No. 1 Railway Operating Group R.C.E.:
No. 1 Railway Operating Company
No. 2 Railway Operating Company
No. 1 Railway Workshop Company
No. 1 Railway Telegraph Company R.C.C.S.*

The last-named consisted of a Headquarters, a Railway Line Maintenance Section and a Railway Telegraph Operating Section, R.C.C.S. (G.O. 242/43) No. 2 Rly Op Coy R.C.E. was formed in Britain in May 1943 (W.D., No. 2 Rly Op Coy, 2 May 43).

TRAINING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

6. After some basic military training the Group, commanded by Lt-Col F.E. Wootton, was despatched overseas. By the end of the month all Canadian railway units were in the U.K., in the following strengths:

	Offs	O.Rs.
H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp	3	24
No. 1 Rly Op Coy	7	368
No. 2 Rly Op Coy	7	368
No. 1 Rly Wksp Coy	7	429
H.Q. No. 1 Rly Tg Coy	1	11
No. 1 Rly Tg Op Sec	1	45
No. 1 Rly Line Maint Sec	1	51
TOTAL	27	1296

(W.D., H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp, 28, 29 Jul 43.
1/Railway/1: Notes on Conference held in the
Office of the A.D.A.G.(A), 23 Aug 43)

Before the beginning of September, No. 1 Rly Op Coy had been allocated to the Longmoor Transportation Centre, Hants, and No. 2 to the Derby Railway Training Centre. No. 1 Rly Tg Op Sec R.C.C.S. was attached to 4 (Armd) Div Sigs at Heathfield, Sussex. Other railway troops, both R.C.E. and R.C.C.S., were located at Colchester, Essex. (W.Ds., H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp and Units, August 1943) The Signals unit

*The abbreviation R.C.C.S. was changed to R.C. Sigs on 1 May 44 (G.O. 250/44).

at Heathfield was under command of H.Q. First Cdn Army. The remaining railway troops were at the disposal of the Directorate of Transportation, War Office, and attached to British railway units for training. For most other purposes, including discipline, the Group came under C.M.H.Q. (1/Railway/1: Memo, D.S.D. War Office to C.M.H.Q., 3 Sep 43; Sr Offr C.M.H.Q. to Under-Secretary of State, War Office, 17 Nov 43)

7. The training of Canadian railway troops included work with British railway organizations - military and civil - and some military training. The two Operating Companies, whose personnel included diesel and steam locomotive crews, shopmen, etc., were employed at various times on the Melbourne Military Railway* and the L.M.S. and London and North-Eastern lines. On 3 Jul 44 both units were concentrated. - No. 1 Coy at Hurworth (near Darlington) and No. 2 at Weston-en-Trent, Derbyshire - for further military training prior to embarking for France. (W.Ds., No. 1 Rly Op Coy, September 1943 - July 1944, and No. 2, July 1943 - July 1944)

8. Meanwhile, during the autumn of 1943 and until 3 Jan 44, No. 1 Rly Wksp Coy had undergone technical training at L.M.S. workshops at Derby. It then moved to Darlington for duty in the L.N.E.R. workshops. While part of the unit was employed on locomotives and machinery, the remainder took small arms and other military training. Between July and October, detachments were sent to Sudbury,

*An 11-mile section carrying heavy colliery traffic, used by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway as a traffic school, and after November 1939 by British railway troops for training purposes (Brigadier R. Micklem, Transportation (in the series "The Second World War; 1939-1945" (War Office, 1950)), p. 25).

Suffolk, and to Longmoor, for specialized training and duties. (W.D., No. 1 Rly Wksp Coy, October 1943 - October 1944)

OPERATIONS ON THE CONTINENT

9. On 4 May 44, the whole of No. 1 Rly Op Gp had been placed under command of the 21st Army Group to serve as L. of C. troops (C.M.H.Q. Adm Order No. 78, 6 May 44). Group Headquarters and the two Operating Companies embarked for Normandy on 28 Aug, and concentrated near Bayeux three days later. In the latter part of September the Group moved farther inland, Headquarters being set up at Elbeuf (on the Seine), where it remained until the end of March 1945. Between 1 and 10 Apr, H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp was located at Nijmegen, and subsequently at Rheine. W.D., H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp, 28 Aug 44 - 10 Apr 45)

10. No. 1 Rly Op Coy, during the first three weeks of September 1944, was employed on the Lisieux-Bernay railway and through to Serquigny - a circuitous line of some 25 miles in eastern Normandy. Finding this line in good condition, the Company was able to run a test train on it as early as 9 Sep, after which normal traffic was started. From 22 Sep operations were extended to Louvières, near the Seine. Commencing in mid-January 1945 detachments were sent to work on the Lisieux-Longeau railway, and to Archerès. Between 14 Mar and 1 Apr the main body was based at Archerès, and during the remainder of April followed Group Headquarters to Nijmegen and Rheine successively. From the latter, the Company detached elements to operate the railway to Osnabruck, east of the Rhine. On 4 May, despite a shortage of rolling stock, the first test on this line proved successful. Next day Company

Headquarters and the main body moved to Kirchweyhe (near Bremen), and five days later the unit opened 110 miles of railway between there and Rheine. (W.D., No. 1 Rly Op Coy, September 1944 - May 1945)

11. On 2 Jun 45 the stretch between Osnabruck and Kirchweyhe was taken over by the Germans, who were found to be very cooperative. A week later the whole Rheine-Kirchweyhe-Munster section was in German hands. Throughout July No. 1 Rly Op Coy - less one detachment at Oldenburg - was concentrated at Laggenbeck, where it was relatively inactive. At the end of the month it was ordered, quite unexpectedly, to assume railway operations between Aachen and Herbenstal. Thus it was not until 10 Oct that all duties finally ceased. (Ibid, May - October 1945)

12. No. 2 Rly Op Coy, from the beginning of September 1944 to the end of the year, had been engaged on the Elbeuf-Serqueux railway - a 40-mile course east of the Seine. Less fortunate than its sister unit at that time, this Company had, in addition to considerable reconnaissance work, to repair a stretch of line that was in rather poor condition. Between 24 Sep, however, until 27 Nov, the railway was used to carry normally heavy traffic; but then the Seine rose to such an extent that a temporary bridge had to be held in place by 22 loaded coal cars. Beginning on 1 Dec, when normal operations were resumed, French personnel commenced taking over. A month later the Canadian unit began work on the line connecting Lisieux, Archerès, Longeau and Amiens. (W.D., No. 2 Rly Op Coy, September 1944 - January 1945)

13. During February and March 1945 the Company was transferred, in two flights, to Nijmegen. From here, early in April, detachments were sent to Rheine, Bocholt and other points in Munster area, principally to repair locomotives and machinery. Nevertheless, the unit was able

to run a test train from Borken to Rheine on 14 Apr; and in ten days' time four trains per day were running on this route. Throughout May German personnel were brought into service under Canadian supervision, and on 22 Jun these completely took over the Rheine-Bocholt line. Accordingly, on 18 Jul, No. 2 Rly Op Coy was withdrawn to Arnhem. (Ibid, February - July 1945)

14. Following a path separate from the two Operating Companies, No. 1 Rly Wksp Coy had landed at Ostende on 19 Nov 44. For the duration of hostilities and until July 1945 the main body of the unit, located in Bruges, was employed in assembling American-made rolling stock. In June alone over 1000 wagons were put into use. Thereafter Belgian personnel assisted in increasing numbers, but it was a British unit - No. 206 Rly Wksp Coy R.E. - that finally replaced the Canadian Workshop Company at Bruges. (W.D. No. 1 Rly Wksp Coy, November 1944 - July 1945)

15. No. 1 Rly Tg Coy R.C. Sigs,* which had been employed on the Great Western Railway in the U.K., had been moved to the Continent at the end of June 1944. Between that time and July 1945 it repaired and constructed some 2500 miles of railway telegraphic line in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Rly Tg Coy, July 1945, p. 4)

16. At this point, mention must be made regarding discipline among railway troops. Many of the troubles in this respect seem to have arisen from the fact that these personnel, many of whom had known little normal military life, were frequently required to operate alone or in small groups, without direct supervision. In one unit War Diary,

*See p. 3, fn.

for instance, 13 out of 31 entries contain reference to offences, apprehensions or punishments (W.D., No. 1 Rly Op Coy, January 1944).

17. As the Canadian railway units, on leaving the fruits of their efforts in other Allied or German hands, were withdrawn to concentration areas, each was duly disbanded. First to be dissolved was No. 2 Rly Op Coy, on 10 Jul 45. Also in July 45, No. 1 Rly Tg Coy was broken up, and in September and October respectively the Railway Workshop Company and the remaining Operating Company followed. Finally Headquarters of the Group, which since late July 1945 had been commanded by Lt-Col H.D. Bowyer, ceased to exist on 29 Nov 45. (G.Os. 52/46, 354/45. W.D., H.Q. No. 1 Rly Op Gp, 20, 26 Jul and 29 Nov 45)

18. This report was prepared in draft by Lt H.D. Martin and revised by Capt. F.R. McGuire.

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